

## The Cultural Politics of Established Churches

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*This paper concentrates on the radical political trend current amongst the clergy of the mainstream churches of the West. It begins by setting out summarily the sociological trends within which these trends occur. The first trend is the continuing process of differentiation. This means that ecclesiastical bodies tend to withdraw from explicit political involvement, whether this be the old "intégriste" position dominant in the late nineteenth century, or the Christian democracy of more recent years. Differentiation also means that clergy are edged out of traditional social structures and lose contact with the implicit understandings which held those structures together. They are forced to define themselves. In some cultures, notably those of Eastern Europe, the traditional social structures are just destroyed. The priesthood is left as an isolated profession serving a remnant, and officially deprived of influences and power outside that remnant.*

*The other trend is toward clerical specialization and the build-up of religious bureaucracies and agencies at national and international levels. These tend to lose contact with the local Christian constituency. Thus many clergy are assimilated to the social role of the intelligentsia, and come to share the left-liberal and even the radical or Marxist attitude mandatory in that social sector. Influences are fed into these agencies congruent with the left-wing attitudes of the progressive middle class. Other influences derive from the increasing participation of Christians from the third world, from the theology of revolution, black theology, and so on. During the course of this paper, distinctions will be made between the crucial areas of progress with respect to race and poverty, and a rhetorical style of cultural politics indulged in by the middle class sector of economically advanced nations. It will further be argued that the new cultural politics espoused*

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*by many clergy (with ramifications in theology and liturgy) are full of contradictions and empty of serious political analysis.*

*I begin with some general examples and some remarks on the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.). I then look at lessening ecclesiastical involvement in the politics of Christian democracy. Finally I provide Catholic and Protestant political profiles.*

*Differentiation.* The typical “radical” Christian despises the simple civic pieties of ordinary people. He is rightly suspicious of the stoic chumminess represented by “Scouting for Boys.” He exalts the prophetic tradition, but forgets that in a whole millennium of biblical history the number of prophets barely exceeded a dozen. The history of human aspiration is very much a history of civic and civil religion, and one may assume that the average sensual man will concur with the pieties of his kind and find identity in the signs and symbols of his group. The admirable Rector of Bethnal Green in London’s East End may declare the People’s flag deepest red, but to most Englishmen, Americans, and Frenchmen for that matter, it is red, white, and blue. The same point is true *mutatis mutandis* for Japan. A civil sensibility and a civic piety is not the whole faith delivered once and for all to the saints, but it is capable of expressing a decent sense of identity and of loyalty – including, sometimes, loyalty to liberty.

The last point about loyalty to liberty is important. For Christians to criticize and lament the crushing pressure of thoughtless patriotism is one thing. To lambast and denigrate the loyalties which provide the base of liberty is something quite different. Liberality draws deep on the well of conservation. The prophetic incision into cancerous patriotism easily cuts out the vital organs of identity and liberty at the same time.

The same applies to Christian criticisms of folk religion.

To draw up the skirts of sectarian virtue and rectitude is to reject the very possibility of religious institutions informing culture at large. The core institutions of cultural piety are certainly being pushed by pressures of differentiation in a sectarian direction, but — in the West at least — some Christians precisely desire the pure and costless righteousness of the sect. They want to accelerate differentiation. Moral criticism could then be so easy and total. Moral parasitism could be embraced as a way of life, and Christians could adopt moral postures as clean and pure as any member of the humanist intelligentsia. For some Christians that is “a consummation devoutly to be wished.”

*Religious bureaucracies.* Not merely do zealous political churchmen ignore or despise the undertow of the ancient pieties on which democratic sentiment reposes, but they adopt a political rhetoric which they direct with special fervor at Western democracy. Listening to this kind of pronouncement, one would suppose sin merely an adjunct of capitalist organization. Up to the Nairobi Conference in the seventies the totalitarian record of Eastern European countries rarely received this same prophetic scrutiny. It even seemed as if Eastern European Christians could go to hell so far as the W.C.C. was concerned, provided that the official representatives of Orthodoxy were allowed out to have their photographs taken at ecumenical gatherings. Some clergy actually regretted the importunity of dissident Baptists and other awkward enthusiasts for faith and liberty.

The situation was, of course, not easy. The Orthodox were important for W.C.C. strategy, and any contact with them, on whatever basis, seemed better than silence and separation. Eastern European Christians themselves were poised over a knife-edge, used as political ambassadors by governments which were ready to exercise a harsh domestic discipline should they play any variations on the role as-

signed them. The same pressures operated on the Christian Peace Conferences held in Prague, until peace finally descended on Prague in 1968. At the same time the W.C.C. was influenced by the new theological thinking thrown up by the pressure of events in Latin America. This is mainly a Catholic phenomenon, since right-wing governments either attempt to use the Church or else thrust it aside. Nevertheless, the "theology of revolution" transcends confessional differences. Theologians of revolution pour new political potions inside the old wineskins, pressing traditional language to new uses.

The problem here is how to know where the shift in meaning has crossed the frontier between social change promoted on a Christian basis and revolution walking behind a smoke-screen of Christian vocabulary. This is where the doctrine of the Eucharist provides a very sensitive indicator. Some revolutionary theologians understand the Eucharist as "God" realized in a communal feast. Others stress anticipation of a revolutionary feeding of the fifty million to come in the new society, or else reject all celebration now until the transformed future makes celebration appropriate. The underlying problem for Catholicism in Latin America relates to the very different stages present in the same society, resulting in a Church stretched out all the way from an archaic patrimonial religion of festivals and saints to the radical theology of middle class revolutionaries. Nobody knows just how far Christianity can ride the Marxist tiger without being gobbled up, physically and conceptually, when "the time" comes.

*Reduced involvement in party politics.* Apart from the impact of third world alignments, the politics of orthodox participation, revolutionary and black theology, there is the situation in Western Europe itself, more especially as concerns "Christian Democracy." This is an almost entirely

Catholic matter, but religious changes have cooperated with other factors to undermine the stabilities created by "Christian Democracy" in the immediate postwar world. In most countries the church-going constituency has been relatively conservative in its voting habits, but over the past decade the stability of confessional voting has become more and more eroded, in Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. The Church has become increasingly unhappy about Christian Democracy as the political arm of corporate Christianity and has complained about being caught up in a neoliberal profane dynamism, especially in West Germany. Thus the Roman Catholic Church in Germany has responded to the lessening of anti-clerical sentiment amongst the Social Democrats and withdrawn from involvement with the C.D.U.

It is noteworthy that even in Portugal the Church wisely kept at a safe distance from the party which claimed a Christian label. Indeed, in Portugal individual Christians have taken up positions at most points of the political spectrum, though the local priests in the north of the country made a signal contribution to the defeat of communist hegemony. In most countries Christians have been repelled by the Communist Party itself, preferring to cooperate with free-ranging Marxists or going behind the Communist Party to join up with the extreme left. Spain is somewhat exceptional in this. Not only has a huge sector of the priesthood shifted to a socialist alignment in the last decade, but there are numerous Christians associated with the Communist Party, more especially of course since it adopted a revisionist position.

*Political attitudes of the clergy.* Here I come more directly to the political attitudes of the clergy, which commentators like Mr. Clifford Longley of the *London times* think imply a major reorientation with consequences for Western cul-

tures at large. Any discussion of these attitudes must distinguish between Catholics and Protestants. This is because the disturbances of the past decade and a half have affected Catholics more intensely, in terms of declines in practice,<sup>1</sup> of alterations in the alignment of ecclesiastical power, of shifts in role specification, and of the cultural politics of liturgical change. The net result is that whereas Catholic priests were once the most anti-Marxist in their attitude, they are now quite prone to the Marxist seduction. By the same token, the Anglican Church, once labelled "The Conservative Party at Prayer," has a powerful left-liberal lobby and visible Marxoidal fringe.

The Protestant churches, meaning especially Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists, are relatively undisturbed and less likely to bend in the radical wind. Their traditional, established liberalism inoculates them somewhat against the ideological fevers ravaging their more ancient and hierarchical rivals. Protestant cultures are in any case resistant both to ecclesiastical doctrine and political dogma, and their experiential emphasis already anticipates the modern cult of experience. They have less far to go and are therefore less inclined to hurry on the journey.

Two points need to be made before charting radical trends amongst Catholics and Protestants. One is that old-fashioned liberals in the Protestant dissenting world are pragmatically active in various movements of social change, even if they mostly lack the trendy overtone. They work, for example, in community politics in the U.S.A. They take positive positions on the women's issue. They are active against authoritarian government or racial injustice in various contexts, for example, South Korea and South Africa. The exceptions are easily listed. One such exception is where Calvinist

1. These declines are documented to my knowledge for the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Holland, France, Spain, Italy, and Germany.

or conservative evangelical religion is linked to a culture under pressure, as occurs in parts of the American South, Northern Ireland, and white, especially Dutch, South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The other is where the paternal, even military, element in Calvinism remains potent, and this will result in somewhat conservative attitudes to the women's issue.

The other point touches on the priestly traditions of Anglicanism and Catholicism. Here the roots ramify over three millennia. They connect role specifications in the priesthood with male and female images in Catholic iconography and dogma and also with role specifications in the culture at large as between male and female. These profound linkages require both a sociological probe and psychoanalytic understanding. All that need be said for the purposes of this argument is that the unhinging of the linkages at the levels of role and religious images provides some of the psychic impetus behind the disorientations described.

*Radical trends amongst Catholics.* It is the link between church doctrine and party dogma which provides the first clue to Catholic developments. Catholicism and Communism are both ideological *systems*, defining truth and excommunicating dissidents. Both have their bastions in relatively archaic, patrimonial social structures. Up to quite recently, the Catholic system provided its priesthood with clear definitions of role and a secure anchorage for identity. Once those definitions became fluid and once the bark of Peter shifted at anchor, many priests were sucked into a whirlpool. Some embraced psychic and political liberation at one and the same time, and were unable to check the impetus of their release from the old structure. There was an easy transition from an ancient system of compulsory beliefs to a contemporary system of required ideology. Simple

2. There are now some discernible and heartening liberal stirrings in the Dutch Reformed Churches.

piety easily became naive political rhetoric, tripping off the tongue like a refurbished sermon.

Others fell into mere confusion and experienced a generalized fear of all authority and ritual highly congruent with the stance of the left-liberal intelligentsia. They were unable to exercise the authority inherent in the priestly role and became awkward charges on their parishes. Mostly they fled the parishes, preferring, for example, university chaplaincies where they could disseminate their preferred political opinions in a congenial atmosphere and help disorganize the constituency of young intellectual Catholics. From the universities they had come, to the universities they would go. Life did not supervene. Their socialism exploited the evident if superficial analogy between medieval organicism and modern collectivism.<sup>3</sup> Their liturgical experiments combined echoes from the middle class spontaneity cult with mandatory groupiness: the higher Buddyhood. This combination can generate contradictory thrusts: spontaneity pushes toward therapy and encounter, while the groupiness can mutate toward the political cell. This mutation is particularly evident in some of the orders, especially the Dominicans. The shift from the monastic cell to the political cell is fairly easy. Some people enjoy being enclosed in both at the same time.

At the moment the contradiction between the demands of revolutionary discipline and the thrust toward psychic exploration is not fully evident. This is because even the Marxoidal gloss is sentimental. Catholic Marxism, like a great deal of secular Western Marxism, is suffused with nostalgia. It rejects the homogenizing thrust of modern industrial societies, regrets the vanishing crafts, the colors and graininess of preindustrial life. Small is beautiful: inter-

3. The "We believe" which now supplants "I believe" in the Creed exploits just this organic root and the new collectivist possibility. Either way individuality is rejected.



mediate technology, minority speech, or whatever allows the human scale.

The political cell, the commune, and the monastic community, all share this human scale. For the Catholic there is the frisson of reviving the archaic in the context of the revolutionary. Anglo-Catholics within the Church of England exploit exactly the same frisson, and do so with a great deal of charm. Nostalgia can be given the gloss of the future as well as the glow of the past. This is very seductive and the defender of, say, the ancient language, traditions, and rights of Languedoc need not wonder whether he is also an unwitting protagonist of Soviet hegemony. Romantic Catholicism can link hands with Romantic Revolution and no questions asked. The paradigm of all this is the pure white of the Dominican robe joined to the blood-red of the People's Flag. The *effect* is not to incorporate the Christian body in the revolutionary army. It is to smudge vital distinctions and to soften up the frame of discourse.

Some Catholics observe the lack of serious Marxist spine behind this style of thinking and are aware that it can quite easily shift toward the plenary indulgences of the spontaneity cult, the indiscriminate appreciation of "cultures," and the inward looking therapies of the sect. As one Dominican remarked about the new liturgical forms: if the People of God stand in a circle, how can they be en marche? If the Catholic "line" and orientation are unhinged, can it be reformed as a disciplined march to the future? (The same question was asked of the student movement: how far did it indulge experience at the expense of revolutionary discipline?)

The answer is: it all depends. The future has become a key category in some theological thinking, whether Catholic or Protestant. Once theologians are deprived of faith they turn to hope, and hope frustrated converts to politics — or back to classic Augustinian realism. When God ceases to

be transcendent he is reembodyed in the community and the future, more especially the community which marches forward into the future. Jesus becomes the teacher of this community and is recast either as a hippy preacher or as a zealot revolutionary sympathizer – or Moses takes over and rings the liberation bell to lead the oppressed to the Promised Land. God participates in history, at first obscurely, and then achieves full revelation in the face of the Risen and Glorified People.

From this point on any number of symbolic translations can be arranged. Marxism can be identified as the movement of the Spirit for Today and Tomorrow. Once “God” is dead a whole new resonance can be given to the idea of the Holy Ghost. Professor Harvey Cox, for example, has been notorious for finding holy and ghostly activity in whatever catches his lively political fancy. The difficulty is that these translations of transcendence first arouse euphoria and then deflate and empty the very dynamism they were intended to sustain. They are the fun thing for half a decade, and then their proponents have to move on.

It is worth adding that the Marxist-Christian dialogue, for all its seriousness, involves tendentious translations of the classic texts on both sides of the divide. This was a point made over a decade ago by Alisdair MacIntyre. Marxists straining to make sense of Christianity and to be open to it easily distort both their own tradition and the religious tradition. The same happens to Christians who wish to incorporate Marxist perspectives. Marxism, after all, is not just a method of analysis which is simultaneously a movement for social justice: it is a new all-embracing ontology which cannot do business with error or tolerate regression to archaic superstition. (I would here draw attention to a brilliant work by an American socialist and Christian, Dale Vree, “On synthesizing Marxism and Christianity,” 1976, which underlines the difficulties of the dialogue and the

marginal character of those who undertake it.)

*Radical trends amongst Protestants.* I turn now more specifically to those manifestations of a radical clerisy which have appeared in Protestantism, more especially the Anglican Church.

The point of departure is a pair of words: "conformist" and "establishment." Both carry a heavy abusive charge, accentuated by their imprecision. They are calculated to strike additional terror into the hearts of clergy because the broad secular meaning overlaps the special ecclesiastical meaning. Lots of people in secular professions manage to be firmly "established" without knowing it or recognizing it. So they are not at all frightened by the word. Indeed the left-liberal establishment uses "established" as a dismissive term. It defends its established position by seeming to attack "the establishment."

But the Anglican clergy are officially designated officers of an established church, and even Methodists and Baptists are socially well-established. Clergy can feel the stigma of establishment acutely, and long to repudiate such a compromising connection. It does not matter that few people are interested in the disestablishment of the Church. The point is that many clergy feel their credentials undermined by their secular entanglements and want to rid themselves of moral ambiguity. This moral ambiguity does not matter to the average sensual radical, who can be a successful lawyer or wealthy publicist, or a richly rewarded denizen of the media without suffering serious discomfort. It is only the ambassadors of Christian revolution who feel their credentials smirched by their ascribed social role. So they agitate for a return to the primitive condition of the Church before it became the religion of the Roman Empire. They set up a seductive symmetry between the pre-Constantinian Church and the post-Constantinian Church. Once Chris-

tianity recovers the role of radical sect it will rediscover its true mission and therewith its élan. Ambiguity will have been abolished and complication eradicated.

A minority of clergy are pushed in this direction by a new marginality of which they are increasingly conscious. They are being edged out of the old secure role in an understood social structure and yet still inhibited from adopting an uncompromised, uncompromising oppositional stance. To live in near-apostolic poverty and be labelled a paid agent of the status quo is more than even Christian flesh can bear. To live courageously at the economic margin and have smart commentators hurl the casual adjective "conformist" is deeply hurtful. To misquote the old liturgy: the burden of pejorative adjectives is intolerable.

So established clergy seek ecclesiastical and secular non-conformity, if haply they may find it. We are all nonconformists now, just as we are all left-liberals. But this new cultural orthodoxy underlines a curious paradox. By adopting mandatory left-liberalism the marginal cleric may succeed in repudiating the old establishment, but he has also embraced the new one with open arms. He has levered himself out of the private school nexus and become a recruit to the kinds of conformity required along the marches of the media and academic.

*Left-liberal conformism.* Once recruited to these views, what basic stances are required of the political cleric? First, he is to reject the establishment, the status quo, and conformity. He is to assimilate his appearance to that of a healthy-minded layman. He is to espouse "self-realization" or "self-actualization," but not competition or achievement. Self-expression is a good, but individualism is an evil; community is approved and consensus disapproved. Thus there is a list of prescribed words and a list of proscribed words indicating rival positions in cultural politics. The political cleric

must ritually recite the prescribed words and abominate the proscribed words.

Why is self-expression all right and individualism anathema? Because individualism refers to the Protestant Ethic of thrift, initiative, self-discipline, and the desire to achieve something in the world, while self-expression refers to the liberated self in authentic spontaneous dialogue and encounter with significant others. This is what the Marxist theoretician Adorno called the jargon of authenticity, and up to quite recently radical sermons and pronouncements were spattered with this jargon.

Work inhibits, self exhibits. The self is characteristically exhibited in group encounter. Political religion dislikes the Church but loves the group. The group can be drawn out of society and, as observed above, is first cousin to the political cell. This is how liturgy comes to be deployed as a kind of slow-motion group theater, a personal exhibition of aggressive cultural politics. A significant sector of liturgical experiment is a pure emanation of groupiness, carefully rubbing out the frames and spaces in which individuality was nourished and protected. These experiments are legitimated as returns to primitive practice, but they are the cultural politics of the sixties carried on by other means. For example, one may or may not like the clutches, grips, and handshakes which go under the name of the Kiss of Peace, but this kind of mandatory spontaneity is a version of the American feely-feelies and the group-grope. People are well and truly touched, made whole or maddened by the laying on of hands.<sup>4</sup>

The phrase "laying on of hands" may introduce one further curious feature of clerical zealotry. It exhibits a strong tincture of neo-clericalism. It often emanates from traditionally clericalist churches and revives the clerical attitude

4. This particular rite arouses either enthusiasm or intense resentment, more usually the latter. Clergymen promote it while congregations smolder.

in plausible disguise. It exalts the laos, the People of God, but despises the congregation. The zealous political cleric often has as little real respect for the People of God as the zealous political academic has for the People. The People of God and the People always need to be liberated from sin or false consciousness by the energy and foresight of the elect.

The form of that liberation remains a problem. Some political clerics make the traditional appeal to personal responsibility. Others rail against structural constraints. The former believe in the potency of goodwill, the latter in the malignancy of social arrangements, more especially those of capitalist society. When goodwill patently fails, there ensues a period of breast-beating and self-flagellation for which there is no absolution. Those confronted by the deep resistance of structures hunt for scapegoats – and can find them in individual Christians, or in the Church as an institution, or in Christian doctrine. (Thus one very distinguished theologian, Gregory Baum, asked me what theological adjustments I had made since the politico-religious murders in Northern Ireland.) These febrile shifts, breast-beatings, and searches for scapegoats arise because political realism in the Augustinian tradition has been forgotten. Naive optimism turns compulsively through every circle of unhappiness, accusation, and frustration.

*Soft utopians.* At any rate there remains the basic contradiction. Part of the radical thrust is spiritual psychology and encounter ideology tuned to Christian instruments. It sometimes overflows in a political vocabulary, but contains little enough by way of serious political analysis. It may also overflow in courageous political witness, but there is still no serious assessment of what kind of society eventually is to be achieved by political action or what costs are to be met and values to be sacrificed en route.

So the political clergymen, basically, are not really en marche. They are assembling the nicest possible ensemble of attitudes. And they are also softening up the frame of discourse. Political sermons disseminate a vocabulary and an accepted frame of discussion even though they are foreign to the complexities, paradoxes, ambiguities, and unintended consequences native to political analysis and action. Their contribution to political attitudes and attitudinizing should not be underestimated. Hard utopians know how to use soft utopians when "the time" comes. Niceness is not without penalties nor naivete without costs.<sup>5</sup>

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5. There is a remarkable absence of non-utopian analyses of the Christian political responsibility, in spite of the fact that many politicians are clearly groping about for it. The theme cannot be pursued here, but it is eminently worth pursuing.